THE EVOLUTION OF CULTURAL FRAMES FOR GOODS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the basic interpretative framework for our understanding of the role and impact of advertising in modern society, as explored more fully in our forthcoming book, Social Communication in Advertising (Methuen, 1985). It is grounded in a concept called "cultural frames for goods," and it seeks to combine developments in communication media, marketing thought, advertising practice, consumption patterns, and mass production into a unified interpretation. It divides the history of these developments in this century into four stages: Idolatry, Iconology, Narcissism, and Totemism.

THINGS COME ALIVE

In a 1983 television advertisement a modestly-dressed young couple stands before the automobile showroom window. As the narrator says "Imagine yourself in an Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera," the couple's images, reflected in the car's metallic paint, undergo magical transformations: In a series of scenes they are shown playing tennis at a club, getting into the car after their game, travelling through a neon-lighted city, being greeted by a doorman at a fancy hotel, and dining by candlelight in an elegant restaurant. During the latter scenes the narrator comments: "No other car is a better reflection on you. Can you think of a better way to spend a night on the town?"

A more recent television advertisement for a new brand of Goodyear tire, "Vector," shows the product in a series of interactions with people. The tire rolls by pedestrians and into a barbershop where it is greeted by name and its tread is examined; it continues down a snow-covered landscape and is saluted by passing skiers; it overtakes a cyclist in a sunny climate; and finally it rolls into an expensive home and is introduced by name by the butler to the master of the house.

Meanwhile in Uganda the Batutsi still write poems and sing songs about their cows, while in Kenya the Masai have added industrial artifacts to their incredible collection of ear ornaments.

Goods have meanings. Goods convey meanings. These are the elementary propositions that help us to understand the consumer society and the role of advertising within it. The authors of a recent book entitled The Meaning of Things call attention to "the ability of an object to convey meaning through its own inherent qualities." (Czikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, p. 43.) As William Leiss has argued in The Limits to Satisfaction, an object's qualities are a complex unity of two broad categories of characteristics, material and symbolic or imputed. Yet the basic point made above can stand as an accurate observation about the communicative function that nestles inside consumption behavior in all human cultures at all times: Objects serve the twin purposes of satisfying needs and conveying meanings.

In general we agree with Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood that "the essential function of consumption is its capacity to make sense." They go on to say: "Forget that commodities are good for eating, clothing, and shelter; forget their usefulness and try instead the idea that commodities are good for thinking; treat them as a nonverbal medium for the human creative faculty" (1978, p. 62). To these remarks we find it necessary to add only the point that it is the role of advertising in modern industrial societies to "verbalize" the possible meanings occurring in social interactions.

Every aspect of contemporary life in market-industrial societies is permeated by the presence of objects. They range from what is wholly familiar to us (the tastes and smells of traditional foods) to what appears at least for now to be bizarre and slightly menacing (such as synthetic blood). Their characteristics range from the simplest (buttons) to the incredibly complex (guided missiles), operating at rates of speed that encompass everything from the peddlar's push-cart to the fastest computers. Merely to list them completely would be a formidable undertaking, and in any case the result would be always out of date.

What is extraordinary is first, how quickly this situation arose and second, how easily the population adapted to it, almost as if it were the "natural" condition of the species. For one has to look back only two hundred years at the most, only to preindustrial societies, to realize what a narrow range of things there were in the normal routines of life, even for the privileged classes, by comparison with the present day. Equally as astonishing is how quickly the bewildering multiplicity of objects in our soceity, a high proportion of which are within the grasp of most persons, has become the "taken-for-granted" context of everyday life. And although the operative mechanisms in many devices are a mystery to most of us, they do not seem to inspire awe or terror, for the most part; on the contrary, they are accepted with a bemused, but slightly indifferent, feeling of delight. After all, one cannot get too excited about the newest video game or electronic gadget, for one expects that, next month or next year, there will be something else yet more titillating.

We should not be misled by the sheer quantity of things around us, however, and suppose incorrectly that little if anything remains to link us with older societies. The material presented by Douglas and Isherwood and other writers shows precisely some fundamental continuities and similarities among human

cultures, from the time of what we call "primitive societies" to our own. The sphere of consumption in general, and how we use goods therein as communicators of meanings, are among the most dramatic instances of such continuities.

Indeed so common is the practice of investing material objects with richly-textured layers of interpretive significance that it must be regarded as a basic feature of the human personality. Things literally "come alive" in the context of social interactions. Not merely as passive adjuncts or decorative accompaniments; rather, it is as if things themselves are alive and vivify human interactions.

In his famous analysis of gift-exchange and reciprocity among the New Zealand Maori, the anthropologist Marcel Mauss claimed that the very basis of exchanges of objects among persons was the idea that the object contains the "life-force" both of the person who made it and the natural materials used. As phrased by Marshall Sahlins, it is "as if the exchange of things were by Maori conceptions the exchange of persons" (1976, p. 215). By way of contrast, our modern market-industrial society fashions its objects through applications of its very rationalist science and technology, which admit of no obscurantist notions such as "life-force." Yet at the same time our own marketing and advertising enterprise represents many of these products to us as if they were magically endowed with life -- in television advertising products speak, move about spontaneously, and bring persons together. So much for technological rationality.

Human relations are mediated by things. In other words, things act as intermediaries for the intentions of human agents, expressing, concealing, shielding, or distorting their motives and objectives. To have things serve us in this way we must represent them in certain forms that make it seem as if the things themselves are alive or are endowed with life-force, for example in the advertisements referred to earlier. They serve thus as a kind of "projective medium" into which we can transfer some of the materials for constructing the intricate webs of personal and social interactions.

We name our collective enterprise for producing goods "the economy," and we often carry over to it our representations of things as living forces. In times of business slowdown there are calls to "get the economy moving again," as if it were some huge, sluggish beast which inexplicably had stopped to rest. High government officials are on record as saying that the objective of public policy is "to stimulate the private sector," an expression which perhaps ought to be dropped from the bureaucratic vocabulary on account of its unfortunate noneconomic undertones. A constant refrain is the admonition to "let the market decide" among various options before us. Investors are said to "lack confidence" in the economy at times, as if it were some ne'er-do-well relative looking for a loan. Medical metaphors abound, and every commentator has a favorite nostrum for restoring the economy's "health."

Goods can act as communicators in social interactions because we breathe life into them, and they in turn vivify our everyday exchanges. At this point we are better able to appreciate the perspective offered by Douglas and Isherwood, which at first seems a trifle odd: "Man needs goods for communicating with others and for making sense of what is going on around him. The two needs are but one, for communication can only be formed in a structured system of meanings. His overriding objective as a consumer, put at its most general, is a concern for information about the changing cultural scene." They go on to say that goods are part of a "live information system" -- and not merely the

messages or messengers in the system, but in fact the very structure of the social message system itself. Finally, what is important is not the meanings attached to a particular thing or type of thing at any moment, but rather the relations among an ensemble of goods (1978, p. 95).

The anthropological perspective on the function of goods in human cultures developed by Douglas and Isherwood is a significant advance in our understanding of contemporary life, and it helps us as well to appreciate the full extent of advertising's role in the consumer society. Note immediately that the phrase "information system" denotes not bits and pieces of data about products but rather the very activity of "making sense out of the cultural world around one." This activity in turn depends upon discovering a structured or patterned system of meanings in our culture, in relation to which an individual can form his or her tastes.

In the consumer society there are, we maintain, no institutions more directly concerned with providing patterned systems of meaning for consumption activity than are marketing and advertising. The evolution of cultural frames for goods in the twentieth century, a conception which we shall explain towards the end of this paper, reveals these patterns in broad outline, and the great influence of the "lifestyle" concept in the most recent period simply shows how explicit the patterning has become. Yet institutional strategies, no matter how influential they may be, do not create or manipulate them unilaterally. Marketers and advertisers canvass the whole range of cultural symbols, past and present, and blend their borrowings therefrom with those characteristics of current goods and services in which, they hope, the symbolic meanings can be made to resonate. The resulting harmonies are by no means always pleasing to the consumers' ears, but they do seem to be willing to return regularly to the theater of consumption for the latest performances.

This is not merely a popular entertainment, however; the processes referred to here define, together with the forms of work and production, how our society reproduces itself over time. We can recapitulate our main argument as follows. Advertising should be understood as a major cultural institution, not merely as one among many tax-deductible expenditures for businesses, because the materials that compose the manifest or surface level of its productions -- the world of goods -- are themselves one of the principal channels of social communication. Anthropological researches show us that this has always been so; what is new is the way we use this channel today: Sidney J. Levy contends that the anthropologists' perspective on culture can "lead to a fuller understanding of why marketing managers do what they do and why consumers buy and consume as they do" through its interpretation of goods and services "not in themselves alone, but in their social symbolic role, as means of exchanging communications and furthering social processes" (1978, p. 568).

When traditional cultures became unviable, and likewise the guidance they used to provide to individuals on how to consume, the "discourse through and about things" could no longer be communicated in the old ways. The market-industrial society, which is unique in this respect not for its obsession with material objects, but only for its capacity to transform the mix and characteristics in the world of objects quickly and regularly, opens new channels through which this discourse can flow. <u>The important point is that goods themselves are the communicators, and it is through them that the discourse flows</u>.

Marketing and advertising are the major components in the technological infrastructure for this communication process in the consumer society, so to speak; other components are youth subcultures, the residues of traditional cultures (especially outside North America), the celebrity or "star" system, and the corporate business style as the pre-eminent model for career progress. In all of them (and others) runs the "discourse through and about things" for the consumer society; and, for example, were marketing and advertising to be banned outright, these other channels, or some newly-designed ones, would have to be pressed into service to take up the slack. For like our ancestors we appear to be compelled to fashion our social interactions in this way.

This then is one of the strongest threads binding together human development from the earliest times to our own; for all its phases are marked by the action of culture in shaping into symbolic forms the material exchanges between humans and the natural environment. This theme has been emphasized in the writings of another anthropologist, Marshall Sahlins, who has contrasted primitive societies with our own in terms of consumption practices (1972, 1976). The most important difference, according to Sahlins, is not in levels of technology or types of objects, but instead in what he calls the "site of symbolic production."

This refers to those social institutions most influential in reproducing and transmitting the behaviorial norms that guide individuals in everyday life, for example in knowing what to eat and how to dress. In "primitive" societies kinship relations occupy the privileged place in this regard, whereas today this role is assumed by the economy. This approach also encourages us once more to look upon the marketplace not just as a decision-making forum for employment, consumer expenditures, and capital formation, but much more broadly as a cultural system, as in fact the privileged institution for the reworking and transmission of the cultural symbols that shape our lives.

The market-oriented discourse through and about things creates a powerful set of symbolic processes, founded on an internal tension that simultaneously unifies and differentiates between persons. On the one hand, this discourse is a unifying force in society because it is anchored in one of the cornerstones of the human personality, namely the propensity for using material objects as intermediaries in social interactions. Thus the ensemble of goods serves as a general communication system in which everyone can participate, at least potentially. On the other hand, the ensemble of goods is not a random assortment, but rather a highly structured collection: Material objects, having a certain permanence and being easily distinguishable from each other in ordinary perception, serve ideally as well to mark social distinctions -- that is, differences in rank or prestige according to who possesses or controls any particular thing, and who does not.

Such discriminations are grounded in what Thorstein Veblen called an "invidious distinction," a judgement on a person's worth made largely in terms of whether or not that person appears to be willing to accept a given consumption standard as a behavioral norm. Even a casual glance will persuade us that the consumer society throws up invidious distinctions everywhere. We are urged constantly to compare the advantages of one brand over another, one class of goods over another, one set of values over another, indeed one "lifestyle package" over another. Yet it is exceedingly difficult to pinpoint a decent basis for opting this way or that, leaving only a cheerful proclivity to play the game for its own sake.

CULTURAL FRAMES FOR GOODS

In earlier societies individuals became acquainted with the meanings carried by objects through culture and customs. In a consumer society needs and commodities must be introduced by some other means: Marketing and advertising become the chief matchmakers. The burgeoning array of new goods that began to emerge from mass production techniques towards the end of the nineteenth century presented businesses with the challenge of "binding" products to culturally-sanctioned formats for the satisfaction of needs. Marketers and advertisers had to start constructing props for the occasion -- sets of masks for goods -- using whatever media technologies and persuasive or "appeal" formats were available to them at a particular time. Behind the masks buried communications lines in which runs our discourse through and about objects crisscross the world of goods randomly, and new ones are being laid every day. But the partners at the masked ball need melodies, not words, for dancing; they also need instruction in the new steps. Cultural frames provide the music and the choreography.

First the ground had to be cleared, ground that had been occupied by traditional types of social collectivities rooted in premodern economic conditions. There social groups had been formed by regional, religious, ethnic, linguistic, craft, and other local customs. And the objects that circulated therein were rooted in and reflected these determinations: the distinctive dress and cuisine of ethnic communities, the closed associations of skilled craftsmen, the special kinds of things provided for feasts and celebrations. Then the coming of the market-industrial system began to change all this.

Where the division of labor, mass migrations from rural to urban areas, sustained technological innovation, and the erosion of traditional customs had rent the fabric of social collectivities, there mass marketing began to feel its way, gradually stitching together a new type of human association.

In the first phase of mass marketing, but before the emergence of the consumer society, the objects that had circulated before were replaced by industrial articles that were promoted largely on the basis of their own"abstract" qualities: their utility, incorporation of technological progress, low cost, and efficiency. Thereafter marketing and advertising strategies sought, with ever greater directness and self-awareness, to fill the void left by the disappearance of traditional collectivities, by creating a sense of social solidarity in messages about the relations between persons and things. Whereas the new system of commodity production emptied the world of the traditional material elements in the lives of groups, the new system of mass marketing sought to refill that world with its own form and content.

The distinctive form of life that the consumer society brings into being is based on a notion about how individuals can regard their affiliation with social groups: It suggests that they can situate themselves in a fluid milieu made up of temporary associations that are distinguishable from each other by styles of appearance and behavior as well as by choices of activities. The key idea is that no one is bound permanently to particular circumstances, originating in accidents of either birth or fortune; on the contrary, everyone can participate in an eternal process whereby groupings are dissolved and regenerated.

The distinctive content of the consumer society is that these temporary associations, based purely on the arbitrary wills of their members, are oriented around structured sets of products and messages about them. "Flappers," "zoot suiters," "soul," "hippies," and "punkers" are names for just a few of the exhibitionist styles which the more cautious majority have skirted apprehensively on their way to department stores and supermarkets; after a decent interval fragments of such styles, suitably muted and sanitized, filter unrecognized into the consumption practices of more respectable folk. Marketers and advertisers are responsible not for imposing behavior patterns on unsuspecting people, but rather for ensuring that (lest the audience fall asleep) sufficiently entertaining new productions are mounted in the theater of consumption, that (lest the audience stay away) the program is changed often, and that (lest the audience be offended) the theatergoers become broadminded enough at least to tolerate, if they cannot enjoy, the extravagances that are paraded before their senses.

It is truly a magic show today. Now at center stage stands the magical representation of social collectivities. In much national product advertising goods stand in an indeterminate relation to the personal activities, interactions, and self-transformations associated with them. There are no "causal" connections between the persons and the things represented; rather, the product simply is associated with a highly-stylized set of visual images. The product image serves as an emblem for a social grouping: A nice illustration is provided by the Coca-Cola ads that portray a multi-racial, multi-ethnic group of young people singing sweetly together about "harmony" in the world.

In this format the product appears as a sign or indicator for a social collectivity as such, which is defined by its appearance and activities as one distinctive grouping among others: the devotees of punk music and rock video, the beer-drinking sports fans, the fitness and healthy living set. These groupings are constituted as a social series by means of the various products with which they are associated.

This mode of presentation assumes the leading role only at the end of a long developmental process that began around the turn of this century. The principal stages of development are sketched in our chart entitled "Evolution of Cultural Frames for Goods in relation to the Four Stages of Marketing/Advertising Strategy in the Twentieth Century." The categories used on the chart are explained briefly in the following pages.

In each case changes in the media are reflected in changes in advertising practices, but in the process of incorporating them there resulted equally profound transformations in the way that advertisers thought about consumers and their approaches towards them, which can be traced in the design of campaigns and marketing strategies. In order to map out these interconnections we have constructed a historically-based account which includes changes over time in the following dimensions: the cultural determinations of consumption behavior, the system of industrial production and distribution, the organization of the advertising business, the communicative models brought into the practice of advertising, and media technologies.

In general the bonding between media and advertising, which is the principal force holding together these varied dimensions, develops in four stages during the twentieth century (adapted from Curti 1967). Of course reality is not so neatly demarcated as the dating of the stages presents it, and the

Evolution of Cultural Frames for Goods in relation to the development of Media, Marketing and Advertising.

MEDIA FOR ADVERTISING*	NEWSPAPERS/ MAGAZINES	RADIO	TELEVISION	
MARKETING STRAGEGY	RATIONAL	NON-RATIONAL	BEHAVIORIST	SEGMENTATION
ADVERTISING STRATEGY	UTILITY	PRODUCT SYMBOLS	PERSONALI-ZATION	LIFESTYLE
PERIOD	1890 1900 1910	1920 1930 1940	1950 1960	1970 1980
	product qualities price use	product qualities symbolic attributes	product person prototype	product activity (person-setting)
METAPHORIC-EMOTIVE THEMES IN ADS	quality, useful, descriptive	status, family, health, white magic, social authority	glamor, romance, sensuality, black magic, self trans-formation	leisure, health, groups, friendship
CULTURAL FRAMES FOR GOODS	IDOLATRY product is abstracted from process of production presented as pure use value.	ICONOLOGY products are embodiments of attri-butes con-figured in social judgement.	NARCISSISM products are personified, satisfaction is judged in interpersonal terms.	TOTEMISM product is emblem of group-related consumption practice.

*Pre-1890: Posters and Billboards.

latter phases of each, representing times of realignment and transformation, shade into their successors. Most importantly, what is characteristic of each period does not disappear, but rather becomes a subordinate component in a newer and more complex environment. For example, rationalistic-informative approaches dominant in the early stage are not so much subverted by the development of new media and ideas about the consumer during the 1920s, as channeled in to specific media and product categories. Another example: Classified ads do not disappear, but gradually are restricted to personal and small retail selling in the major newspapers. The development of advertising is a process of "layering" techniques and strategies, culminating in a versatile, multi-dimensional armory. Few ingredients have ever been simply discarded or forgotten; almost everything in the storeroom subsequently was dusted off, newly outfitted, and returned to service in a more specialized niche.

Stage One: The Product-Oriented Approach (1890-1925).

The development of commercialized print media, including a more powerful commercial press and the mass consumer magazines, are closely related to the first period of change in advertising. It is marked on the goods production side by new national branded products, and the service agencies develop with them; reaching beyond their earlier functions as space sellers, they concentrate on copywriting and advertising design. The agencies establish communication activities as the unifying element in the services they offer. They systematize and develop new styles of appeal, leaving behind the "announcements" of earlier periods in favor of a persuastive informational approach arguing the merits of the product. The appeals are predominantly rationalistic in the sense that "reason-why" demands an explanation of the motivation for consumption and use of a product. The emphasis is on the written text as the core of this explanation, although a major consequence of the commercial and magazine revolutions is the increasing use of illustration and visual layout elements in the development of arguments about the qualities of the product. In focusing mainly on national campaigns, the agencies beome particularly important to the consumer magazine industry. In doing so they extend their explorations of the stylistic elements of campaign design, which merges visual and rhetorical devices and codifies these in agency practice.

Stage Two: Product Symbols (1925-1945).

The first consequence of the professionalization achieved during the previous phase is to make advertising capable of influencing public policy on the development of radio, with the agencies again responding most positively and opportunistically to the national advertising possibilities of this new medium. Research into audiences for media is integrated into the mainstream of agency practice, broadening the definition of marketing services offered by the agencies. The period sees the agencies move closer to the marketing concept, in which consumer disposition becomes a crucial element in advertising; yet the knowledge about the consumer is limited to very broad demographic or polling-based evidence. In this context marketing thought begins to shift towards the irrational or symbolic grounding of consumption based on the notion of appeals or motives. This strategy puts less emphasis on the product and what it does as the basis of selling -- or, more precisely, product-oriented emphasis gradually is confined to particular media and types of goods.

The experience with media begins to change the very practice of advertising. In magazines the use of photography and illustration begins to open up innovations in the associational dimension of argumentation. Products are presented less and less on the basis of a performance promise, more in seeking to make them "resonate" with qualities desired by consumers -- status, glamor, reduction of anxiety, happy families -- all of which can become social motivations for consumption. In radio, the idea of institutional association is the basis of early sponsorship of programming, but during the nineteen-thirties experience with the role of dialogue, stars, and the development of characters allows the advertiser to assimilate much more about the social context of consumption as the basis of advertising strategy. "Tie-ins" between product and program, attention devices, consistent and strong brand images, and testimonials knit together goods with the social, rather than the functional, basis of consumption.

Stage Three: Personalization (1945-1965).

The industry as a whole adjusted to the communications environment created by television, and the agencies transferred knowledge of and contact made with the entertainment world through radio and magazines to the new medium. Television quickly became the major medium for national branded product campaigns and in many cases the major source of income for the agencies. The new medium could combine design and cultural symbolism with characterization, story line, and dialogue. The communicative potential of television offered many new avenues for national advertising as the personnel, stylistics of imagery, patterns of attention, and programming format were bent to the selling purposes of advertising. The agencies were also major players in the realignment of content orientations in older media, as both radio and magazines adjusted to the loss of certain types of major national accounts by tailoring their subject matter and editorial slants to new target audiences.

Second, both creative and research oriented professionals agreed that the centerpiece of effective advertising is knowing **more** about the consumer. Now agencies once again expand advertising practice so as to include new types of research, most notably the application of psychological concepts and techniques to studying the consumers and what makes them buy. The advertiser seeks to gain access to the psychological makeup of consumers through personnel who are "in tune with the times" and who understand the ordinary consumer. The overall outcome is a marketing strategy and advertising stylistics that orbits around the idea of a prototypical mass consumer who is accessible through television, the quintessential mass medium, and who is characterized by a limited set of traits (interest in convenience, fascination with technology and science, desire for glamor).

Stage Four: Market Segmentation (1965-1985).

In this phase advertising practice adapted to the multi-media conditions of the present marketplace. Television itself was forced to assemble specific types of audiences desired by advertisers in order to compete with other media which offer better access to local and specialized markets. Advertising is now seen as part of the marketing mix rather than as the main route to promoting consumption, and the agencies modified their routines accordingly, embracing marketing management, a philosophy which incorporates a whole new set of statistical and marketing research procedures into the prepration of advertising campaigns. These statistical packages concentrate not on knowledge of the

consumer personality but on activities of different subgroups within the market. The breakouts of the marketing research become the basis for other decisions made by the agency on design, media buying, and overall strategy. The data usually provide some analysis of the media practices, consumption preferences, and lifestyle attitudes of consumer subpopulations, allowing the agency to formulate marketing campaigns precisely targeted at particular groups of buyers. For there is no point in wasting money by broadcasting expensive messages to those who, as a bit of judicious investigation will reveal, are bound and determined to remain indifferent to them.

In conclusion, we wish to remind the reader that each successive phase does not supplant the foregoing ones, but rather complements them, adding variations and new operations to the existing repertoire. Posters, signs, and flyers -- the classic means of publicity in early times -- still flourish. Classified and local advertising still provide up to one-third of newspaper revenue. "Rationalist," text-oriented ads still frequently appear in the pages of newspapers and some magazines, especially for certain types of consumer goods (stereo equipment, personal computers, more expensive automobile lines). The status-envy appeal formats of the nineteen-thirties, the testimonial pitches, and the celebrity appearance all persist for specific uses.

This is an "articulated" communication system, a collection of distinct yet interconnected parts, composed of products, persuasive strategies, and media channels, whose unity is forged by the accumulated experience of the advertising agencies.

The unique character of each stage now can be illuminated more clearly by combining its attributes under the designation of a cultural frame. Remember that the frames are meant not to suggest we can segregate events neatly into separate piles -- since human action is not a well-ordered phenomenon, to say the least --, but rather that they can help us to put a mark where the edges of behavioral patterns (that in themselves remain rather indistinct) rub up against one another. In the same order of appearance as the stages described above, the four cultural frames for goods are: Idolatry, Iconology, Narcissism, and Totemism.

Stage One: Idolatry: We name the period 1890-1925 the idolatrous phase of the market-industrial society because there is a strong tone of veneration about products in its advertising messages. What generated this tone was the newly-discovered sense of power and accomplishment within the industrial system after 1875, founded on the recognition that its great capacities could be applied to the mass production of consumer goods. There followed a great outpouring of mechanical devices, cleverly answering or anticipating the requirements of every conceivable task and occasion in domestic life, so bountiful that some persons surely must have feared being buried under an avalanche of objects.

The overt selling strategy can be described as "rational" because its discourse is saturated with descriptive narratives about products and their many qualities, about the great range of their potential uses and benefits, and about their common-sense advantages in saving time, energy, and money. But it must also be characterized as a "quasi-logical" discourse because the surface appearance of the text -- dispassionate, informative, elaborately reasoned -- concealed vital qualitative differences between quite sensible products and uses, on the one hand, and others that were simply fraudulent and

sometimes even dangerous, on the other. The patent-medicine advertising of this time is notorious for systematically confusing real and imaginary ailments, and even more so for making utterly unfounded claims about the efficacy of products. The proliferation of cocaine-based elixirs until about 1905, highly recommended for regular use by housewives and children, reminds us why some restrictions on the creative imaginations of producers and marketers are thought to be necessary.

Whether the uses were exotic or prosaic, the discourse through and about objects in the idolatrous phase was anchored in the object itself and its image. Our designation is not meant to suggest that what occurred then was generally false or misleading: The great majority of these goods had some sensible quotient of genuine utility, and indeed there is in the lavish descriptions of their qualities an unmistakeable undertone of equally genuine pride in their manufacture. Rather, it is intended to highlight the inherent limitation in this first phase, the element that was at one and the same time its greatest strength and its most serious weakness.

The "veneration of the object," while offering a coherent design principle for messages about the relations between persons and things, and while celebrating enthusiastically the technological innovations of the day, was a backward-looking practice in many respects, and thus was an inadequate medium for the newly-emerging consumer society. Its archaic element was that the uses with which products largely were associated originated in traditional patterns of activity and traditional stereotypes for personal roles. The messages about the new products extolled their capacity for helping people do better and more quickly the tasks they were accustomed to doing; by and large, they did not seek to upset the culturally-grounded interpretations (for example, male versus female distinctions) either for familiar undertakings themselves or for the types of objects ordinarily associated with them. This represented a severe limitation on the scope of the consumer market, with respect not only to the range of goods supplied for it, but more importantly to the far richer range of meanings that could be attached to goods once traditional roles and activity patterns were challenged.

Stage Two: Iconology: Icons are symbols, and in the iconistic period (1925-1945) -- which is the initial phase of the consumer society -- the utilitarian aspects of goods are subordinated more and more deeply beneath a network of abstract qualities and values. In contrast to the first phase, here the masks for goods are not copied directly from the manifest appearances of product characteristics or allegations about pressing personal needs. This marks the transition-point where an earlier denotative discourse, reflecting quite specific attributions of qualities to things, becomes subordinated thereafter to a far more expansive connotative discourse, rooted in suggestion, metaphor, analogy, and inference.

In the iconistic phase the focal point swings away from the object as an independent entity and towards the person as the intended user, but the process stops half-way along the arc, so to speak. For although the qualities of goods referred to in advertisements are generally cast in terms that are more abstract and merely suggestive than they were earlier, these qualities are still bound tightly to the things themselves: Automobiles are expressions of a modern outlook, soaps of family integrity and caring, shoes of sobriety or status. (This theme is epitomized in the mode of representation that we have named "white magic," wherein the product appears to capture or control some potent but

largely unspecified force of nature.) On the other hand, the persons who appear in ads are not yet autonomous individuals; they carry the burden of society's commitment to family structure, status differentiation, and hierarchical authority, and they are often mere exemplars of reigning social values.

Iconology is the outcome of a conceptual and categorial process. It is a system of meanings, not a representation of feelings. This is its own inherent limitation. For the categories that were supposed to link the attributes of things (freshness, goodness) with the interests of persons (respecting family, health concerns, status, authority figures) are too domineering: These abstract determinations overwhelm all other elements in the message format, causing both products and persons to appear "frozen" in space and time. Its communicative power is checked and held in static equilibrium, hovering uncertainly between the poles of persons and products.

Phase Three: Narcissism: Whatever its ultimate shortcomings the iconistic era opened the way towards more satisfactory cultural frames for goods in the consumer society. As the focal point continued to shift closer to the image of the person, it brought clearly into view what had been lacking earlier: emotion. To make the discourse through and about objects truly come alive required greater psychological depth in the portrayal of the person, the creation of a domain where the meanings of things could resonate in response to an individual's changing emotional states. Having been admitted to the innermost recesses of the psyche, the product as fetish reciprocates by placing its powers at the individual's disposal. A predominant theme in advertisements in the narcissistic phase (1945-1965) is images of control over other peoples' judgements, exerted with the product's assistance; we have labelled this "black magic."

During this period objects are released from bondage to authoritative symbols. For the first time in the consumer society, things enter the sphere of ordinary human experience, and the means of entry is the metaphor of "personality." The most striking example is what has been called the "mirror ad," wherein the human face (almost always a woman's face) dominates the scene and stares out from the medium at the viewer-consumer. Like the product symbol ad of the preceding era, this format too has a kind of domineering tone; the difference is that this tone is carried not by abstract values but by the authoritative gaze of the human persona. (The literal meaning of the word "persona" is "actor's mask.") Despite the fact that the model in the ads is stylized, rather distant, and thus not easily recognized as a "real" person -- a kind of "imaginary other" --, there is enough emotional force in the gaze to create a bond of identification between the viewer and the ad-persona.

Persons are shown in social interactions as well. "Romance" was for the nineteen-fifties an effective way of communicating suggestions about erotic relationships without giving too much offence; images of warm intra-family feeling were also prominent. Products seemed to bask in the glow of interpersonal attachments, as it were, showing for the first time in a market-oriented system that objects not only carried cues for public behavior, but also were fitting and proper throughout the interior regions of individual psychology.

The personification format too had its own limitation, but it was one that was easily overcome. The range of imagery used for displaying the product in relation to interpersonal dynamics had been too narrow, too conventional. But

meanwhile industrial society had been changing rapidly: Steadily rising real incomes during this phase opened the way to the far freer experimentation with "styles" of life and consumption that was to become a hallmark of the succeeding period.

Phase Four: Totemism: In primitive societies totems are representations of animals or other natural objects that are identified with a particular subgroup, such as a clan. But the totemic artifacts as a whole also constitute a code, that is, a system of social meanings: The things represented as totems (such as different animal species) are thought to stand in some intrinsic relation to each other; thus the totems are emblems for interrelationships as such that can be "read" for what they signify about social interactions among those who are divided and grouped under them.

A few years ago Marshall Sahlins applied the concept of totemism to contemporary society. Whereas traditional totemism constructs a "vast and dynamic scheme of thought" by its "systematic arrangement of meaningful differences" in representations of natural species, the market-industrial society seeks to do something similar using manufactures: "The goods stand as an object code for the signification and valuation of persons and occasions, functions and situations" (1976, p. 178).

During the totemistic phase (1965-present) the identifying features of the three preceding periods are recalled and synthesized. Here the product image gradually is freed from serving only the narrowly utilitarian qualities of the thing itself (idolatry), abstract and authoritative symbols (iconology), or a too restrictive array of interpersonal relations (narcissism). Here utility, symbolism, and personae are mixed and remixed under the sign of the group. Consumption is meant to be a spectacle, a public enterprise: Product images fulfill their totemic potentialities in becoming emblems for social collectivities, principally by means of their associations with lifestyles.

Lifestyle patterns incorporate social differentiation and testify to the existence of subgroups through symbolic displays, thus acting quite like the older "totemic operators." The totems (product images) themselves are the badges of group membership, which also entails self-administered codes of authority for dress, appearance, popular entertainment, customary places of assembly, behavior rituals, and role stereotyping (for example, "macho" versus "non-macho" subgroups).

The masks that goods now wear to market, reflecting design techniques perfected over almost a century of marketing/advertising strategies, bear the emblems of ever-shifting lifestyle patterns. The existence of such patterns means that in the consumer society there is a systematic, integrated, and differentiated domain of social behavior oriented around consumption practices.

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